

# DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ENDEAVOR.

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*Mr. President and Members of the Association:*

LOOKING backward half a century and tracing the logical course of events, scientific sanitation of communities as a preventive of epidemic pestilences had its origin in England as the result of a very simple incident in 1849.

Cholera was approaching England for the first time since its appalling decimation of cities and villages in 1832. Public alarm became so intense that the clergy was moved to resort to the old method of arresting the progress of epidemics and thus allaying the apprehensions of the people by the appointment of a day of National humiliation and prayer. A large and influential committee of clergymen was selected to visit the Prime Minister and request him to issue the usual proclamation. His reply was to this effect:—"Go back to your homes and make them and their surroundings clean and keep them clean, then ask the Almighty to bless your efforts at protection against the pestilence."

The clergymen and religious classes of England were shocked at his irreverence and astonished at his reliance on such a trivial measure for protection from a pestilence sent by God as a punishment of the sins of the people. The day of fasting and prayer was ac-

cordingly held, under the sanction of the Church, throughout England.

The cholera came and wrought its usual havoc in the cities and villages of the country, being stayed in its progress by neither the prayers of the clergy, nor the fumes of sulphur burned in the houses and streets, the most potent preventive agent against the spread of pestilences then known. The Prime Minister's advice was not only not followed, but was the subject of universal ridicule.

At length the cholera disappeared as it came of its apparent own free will. The Registrar General then proceeded to "take stock" of the results of the visitation and found that the toll was very heavy, not only in the reduction of the population, but in the amount of sickness, misery and domestic waste that followed in its trail. But one bright spot illumined the dark picture which he drew of the results of the epidemic. A small interior town reported that not a single case of cholera had occurred among its people though it visited all of the neighboring villages with great mortality of the people. On inquiry as to the reason that this little hamlet was passed over by the pestilence it was learned that the authorities had taken the Prime Minister's advice to the Committee seriously and had not only thoroughly cleaned

the homes, the streets and all waste places, but had appointed a "Vigilance Committee" with full power to enforce cleanliness. It farther appeared that not only was the town saved from cholera by this simple and rational means but there was a great diminution of all forms of disease. This incident made sanitation a science in England. It became the popular political demand of candidates for office and one very prominent politician was so annoyed by questions as to his views of certain current sanitary questions that he cried out, "Sanitas sanitatum omnis sanitas." The Premier's words were "Apples of gold in pictures of silver."

In 1863-4 the initial incident occurred in New York City which gave the vital impulse to sanitary reform in this country. An epidemic of typhus fever was raging, causing widespread alarm. While in charge of a typhus fever hospital my attention was called to the large number of cases that came from a single house. For the purpose of determining the conditions under which the people lived I visited it and found it a typical fever nest—a filthy, deserted building, the resort of immigrant families. The attempt to clean or close this house disclosed the fact that there was neither law, ordinance, or force, of any legal form, adequate to effect that object.

These facts becoming public excited an interest amounting to indignation and led to a "Citizens Association" undertaking to secure adequate health laws. The final outcome of the agitation was the enactment of the Metropolitan Health Law, in 1866. This law was drafted by Hon. Dorman B.

Eaton and myself after an examination of existing health laws. By its perfection in details and especially by the extreme power which it gave health authorities in the performance of their duties, it was revolutionary.

We incorporated in the Metropolitan Law a new feature which created an epoch in the administration of sanitary laws and ordinances. Hitherto, health authorities, like other public officials, were liable to be restrained in the performance of their duties by the courts and thus it became difficult often to remove nuisances dangerous to life and detrimental to health. It seemed to us that simple common sense dictated a provision of the law that when the health authorities officially declared any matter or thing dangerous to life and detrimental to health nothing should interfere with the Board's order of abatement. Accordingly a clause of the law was drafted forbidding any court proceedings delaying or obstructing its abatement of nuisances.

Practically it was an anomaly in municipal government, as it created a Commission with power to make and execute its own laws and sit in judgment on its own acts. It was a veritable "Imperium in Imperio." Its constitutionality was tested in the courts but it was sustained and for half a century it has given to New York its most popular and useful department of government. So apprehensive was the legislature that it would prove expensive that its expenditures were restricted to \$50,000 annually. Now it is freely accorded \$4,000,000.

And the city has been richly rewarded for its expenditure. The mor-

tality of its people has been reduced from 38 in the 1,000 to 12 in the 1,000, which means that 26 persons in every 1,000 are now annually saved who would have died in New York City if the conditions fatal to life were the same as half a century ago. These figures carried to a logical conclusion give the following almost incredible results, viz., if, in every 1,000 population, 26 are saved, in 100,000 population, 2,600 are saved, and in 1,000,000 population, 26,000 are saved and in a population of 5,000,000 the present population of the city, 130,000 are annually saved who would have perished if the conditions affecting the public health were the same as in 1866, the date of the enactment of the Metropolitan Health Law.

It is true that many public improvements have contributed to these extraordinary results, but even these were for the most part the outcome of the agitation for city cleanliness.

The American Public Health Association had its inception in the Metropolitan Board of Health. During the three years' struggle to secure the law under which it was organized, a widespread interest was created in the general subject of civic sanitation. This was greatly intensified by the success of the Metropolitan Board in its complete control of an epidemic of cholera which attacked the city immediately after the organization of the Board. Efforts were made in different cities to organize health departments but there was that lack of cordial public support essential to success. It was evident that the most pressing need of these efforts, to give permanent

success, was the creation of a dominant public sentiment like that of England which would not only sustain, but would demand sanitary reform of public officials.

As a Commissioner of the Metropolitan Board I had a large correspondence with those interested in promoting sanitary organizations, and in conference it was determined to undertake a campaign of education through the medium of a nation-wide association, whose annual meetings in different parts of the country and whose publications would tend to awaken and maintain the active and permanent interest of the people in sanitary administration. The organization of this Association at Atlantic City followed.

Nearly half a century has elapsed. Has the Association fulfilled its high mission as expressed in its Constitution, "The advancement of sanitary science, and the promotion of organizations and measures for the practical application of public hygiene." To effect "The promotion of organizations and measures for the practical application of public hygiene," one of the earliest acts of the Association was to instruct the Secretary "To open correspondence with local health authorities of all parts of the United States, requesting information upon matters relating to the health of their respective localities, and offering to reply to any inquiries on similar subjects which may be made by them."

This correspondence led to the diffusion of a vast amount of information on questions relating to the necessary provisions of sanitary laws, the plan of a well organized board of

health, the methods of sanitation of cities, the use of disinfectants. These were new subjects with which few were familiar and yet they embodied the basic principles of the practical application of public hygiene. Boards of health increased rapidly and each was organized with adequate powers and equipment.

The annual meetings were planned with a view to the greatest possible effect on the people of the locality. To this end the sessions during the day were devoted to the reading and discussion of papers, and the meetings of the evening to the addresses of popular speakers. Personal observation of these meetings convinced me of their great importance in awakening an interest in sanitation of a class of people who could not otherwise be interested. The membership of the Association was also greatly increased. The first meeting in Cincinnati, the second in New York and the third in Philadelphia were notable for the public interest excited locally and throughout the entire country by the wide publication of its proceedings.

During the past few years there have been strenuous but unsuccessful efforts made by a Committee of One Hundred eminent citizens to secure the creation by Congress of a National Department of Health with a Cabinet Secretary at its head. It is an interesting fact that this Association, at its preliminary meeting at Atlantic City, took cognizance of the need of a national health authority, and that subsequently it appointed a committee empowered to take such action as was deemed necessary to effect that object. For a time

the committee failed to accomplish anything, but taking advantage of the great epidemic of yellow fever of 1878-9 it secured the necessary legislation and the establishment of a National Board of Health. Unfortunately the law contained a clause limiting its existence to four years and at the end of that period it lapsed. It had done valuable work, especially in its investigations of the yellow fever epidemic and of an outbreak of cholera. Meantime its appropriations were transferred to the Marine Hospital Service on which Congress conferred, from time to time, public health duties of such a distinctive character as to entitle it to be known as the Public Health Service.

In these now historical events we have an explanation of the failure of the Committee of One Hundred to establish by act of Congress a fully organized Department of Health. A generation earlier we learned that Congress is averse to creating a new Department in the Government, but it will increase the duties and powers of subordinate branches of the public service, and if that service is so conducted as to establish a manifest necessity of its being elevated to the position of an independent Department of the general Government with a Cabinet officer at its head, Congress readily yields and enacts the necessary laws. In this manner existing Departments, like that of Agriculture, have been established.

Impressed by these facts in our early experience I suggested, at the Buffalo meeting, that the Association take such action as will secure from Congress the legislation necessary to

make "The Public Health Service" "The Department of Health" of the government. It must be evident to every one familiar with the operations of that Service during the last decade that it has gradually assumed a position that requires little more than an adjustment to its new relations to other Departments of Government and a broadening of its powers, duties and equipment, to make it a most complete Department of Public Health. Its altogether admirable methods of research, its successful efforts to control and exterminate the bubonic plague, its judicious coöperation with municipal and state health authorities and its world-wide watchfulness of the movements of contagious diseases as they affect emigrants to this country, entitle it to the confidence and support of Congress. I can conceive no greater public service that the Association can render the country than the installation, through the medium of necessary legislation, of the United States Public Health Service as the Department of Public Health of the government and thus accomplish one of the first objects of the Association. And the time seems to be especially opportune for such an effort owing to the interest in the question, both in Congress and in the country, due to the widespread

agitation of the subject by the Committee of One Hundred.

Mr. President:—I fear I have trespassed too long upon your time and patience with these crude reminiscences of the early days of the Association, but my deep and abiding interest in its success will, I trust, be a sufficient apology. I esteem it a remarkable privilege that I am permitted to attend this Forty-third anniversary meeting. With the exception of the distinguished Professor Emeritus of Chemistry of Columbia University of New York, Charles F. Chandler—like Job's messengers—I can say, "I only am escaped alone to tell thee" the events that led to, and attended, the organization of the Association.

I well remember the *personnel* of the small but enthusiastic gathering at Atlantic City on the 12th of September, 1872, forty-three years past. There were Bacon of New Haven; Harris, Chandler, Janes and Morris of New York; Hartshorne of Philadelphia; Cox of Washington; Rauch of Chicago; Clendenin of Cincinnati; Woodworth of the Marine Hospital Service—all but two silent now and forever more. But their works do follow them. In great feebleness, but with abiding faith, they planted the tree, now grown to such dimensions, whose leaves are "For the healing of the nations."